**Title:** ‘Risky’ representation: The portrayal of women with mobility impairment in twenty- first-century advertising

# Abstract

Representations of disability and gender in advertising have been traditionally confined by narrow ideals surrounding body image. Recently, portrayals of disabled women in advertising have substantially grown in volume and variety. This research applies a feminist disability studies critique to the exploration of women with mobility impairments as ‘risky’ in twenty- first-century advertising. Feminist disability studies recognises culture as a key site in which disabled women have been historically misrepresented. While existing research dominantly focuses on textual analyses of advertisements, this study presents empirical data collected via semi-structured interviews with disabled women. Some women believe that the link between disabled women and riskiness sustains stereotypical attitudes and suggest that women with mobility impairments are included in advertisements as a form of ‘safe quirkiness’. However, others welcome provocative portrayals of women with mobility impairment and suggest that such representations challenge presumptions of disabled women as passive.

# Key words

Advertising; feminist disability studies; disabled women; mobility impairment; risk; cultural stereotypes

# Points of Interest

* In the past, disabled people were not included in advertisements, or, they were mainly shown in charity advertisements
* Now, the makers of different types of advertisements are more likely to show images of disabled people
* Some advertisements show disabled women as ‘risky’, for example, rebelling against society or causing other people to be intimidated
* By asking disabled women what they think of these advertisements, stronger understandings of whether the link between disability and risk is useful or harmful can be made
* The results of this research show how disabled women use their life experiences and personal beliefs to explore advertisements that supposedly represent them

# Introduction

By analysing representations of disability and gender in advertising through a feminist disability studies lens, this research addresses an aspect of the global issue of disabled women’s misrepresentation in culture. The focus of this article is the portrayal of women with mobility impairments as ‘risky’ in UK and US advertisements (ads), produced post- 2000. My qualitative analyses of three multi-media ads featuring women with mobility impairments are combined with five disabled women’s analyses of the same ads1. Existing research in the area of disability and advertising has variously adopted textual analyses (Bolt, 2014; Haller, 2010; Haller and Ralph, 2006; Heiss, 2011). This article provides an original contribution by exploring how ads are navigated by the individuals whom they are supposed to represent. It is demonstrated that individuals draw on their life experiences when negotiating advertising representations and challenging cultural stereotypes.

As well as addressing the impact of advertising representations on individuals, this research recognises the macro impact ads have on societal attitudes. Ads have the ability to communicate socio-cultural beliefs and values at a fast pace and international level (Leiss *et al.,* 2005; Yeshin, 2011). The makers of ads aim to deliver messages that resonate with the

1 The findings presented in this article are drawn from a larger research project I undertook for my doctoral studies at Lancaster University. For my doctoral research, nine ads featuring disabled women were used: three ads portraying women with mobility impairment, three ads portraying women with visual impairment and three ads portraying women with mental health issues. My own analyses of ads were combined with participant responses to ads, gathered via semi-structured interviews. In total, fifteen disabled women who self-identified with the impairment groups were interviewed.

values of target audiences (Sheenan, 2014). Therefore, ads reflect socially desirable ideologies (Hahn, 1997). Feminist disability studies inquiry is warranted in this respect due to the contribution of advertising content to the ‘normative divide’, that is, the distinction reflected in socio-cultural contexts that there are normative and non-normative ways of living, behaving and appearing (Bolt, 2019:96).

Ads should not be viewed as providing absolute reflections of the surrounding world. Rather, ads often present ‘blurred’ reflections of real-life scenarios (Paxson, 2018:17). Advertising representations of disabled women should not be considered as exact replications of socio- cultural attitudes toward women with impairments. Paxson (2018) suggests that media texts do not construct reality, rather, ‘they create a value system for how we look at and interpret reality’ (Paxson, 2018:16). In media studies, audience reception of advertising content is commonly understood as a process of negotiation, rather than suggesting that audiences passively absorb advertising messages (Hall, 1973; Scott, 1994). Taking a feminist disability studies approach to the examination of audience negotiation of ads connects with the social justice issue of how disabled women respond to their cultural (mis)representation.

On the subject of disability, cultural ideologies and consumerism, Hughes *et al.,* (2005:12) suggests that the disabled form is often considered undesirable in terms of ‘physical, cultural and social capital’. Consequently, Hughes *et al.,* suggest that disabled people are less likely to be included in advertisements as disability is largely not viewed as compatible with desirable cultural ideologies. When disabled people are portrayed, they are frequently shown in one- dimensional ways – their impairment status is problematically shown as the most important trait (Hughes *et al.,* 2005). Therefore, opportunities for disabled people to self-navigate consumer culture and appropriate their own identities are curtailed (Hughes *et al.,* 2005). Of

particular interest in this article is the extent to which the theme of riskiness may or may not subsume realistic representations of disabled women as multi-dimensional individuals.

# Taking a feminist disability studies approach to disabled women’s negotiations of culture

Applying a feminist disability studies critique to representations of women with mobility impairment as risky in ads and consulting disabled women in this process is important for two core reasons. First, feminist disability studies scholars argue that disability studies research has traditionally ignored embodied experiences of disability and impairment (Crow, 1996; Morris, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996; Reeve, 2002, 2006, 2014; Thomas, 1997, 1999;

Wendell, 1996, 1997). Second, cultural representations of disability are identified as a significant site of oppression and misrepresentation for disabled women (Donaldson, 2003; Garland-Thomson, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2014; Shakespeare, 1994).

Feminist disability studies attends to intersections between feminism and disability studies. A core focus is reclaiming embodied experience as an empowering form of knowledge, rather than remaining in the realms of medicalised discourse (Morris, 1991; Crow, 1996; Wendell, 1996; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Thomas, 1999; Fawcett, 2000;

Shakespeare and Watson, 2002; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Hall, 2011; Bê Pereira, 2012). For some, the key task of feminist disability studies is challenging the social model’s reluctance to examine personal experiences of impairment and disablement (Crow, 1996; Thomas, 1999; Shakespeare and Watson, 2002; Bê Pereira, 2012). Feminist theory acknowledges personal realms as political. For example, by recognising how power imbalances based on gender manifest in relationships, or, considering how individuals can contribute to political change in their everyday lives (Schuster, 2017). Contrastingly, disability studies has traditionally sought to move focus away from individuals with impairments and on to disabling barriers in society, for example, inaccessible environments and socio-political inequalities facing disabled people.

The disability studies movement has achieved great gains in shifting understanding of disability as a societal ‘problem’, as opposed to individual ‘deficit’. However, some disabled people are unsure how the disablement they experience in personal realms can be expressed in a way that is in-keeping with social constructivist traditions in disability studies (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). Although, it is important to note that critical development of the social model does not involve its abandonment (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001).

Rather, it is suggested that both internal and external accounts of impairment and disability should be equally treated as political issues in the disability rights movement (Crow, 1996). Heeding this point, feminist disability studies is borne out of the sharing of disabled women’s embodied narratives, used to dismantle sexist and ableist assumptions (Garland Thomson, 2014). Moreover, feminist disability studies inquiry is invested in exploring ways in which disabled women may reclaim identities denied to them in popular culture, for example, the portrayal of disabled women as feminine or sexual (Garland Thomson, 2011).

Writing from a feminist philosophical perspective, Wendell (1996:165) adds to this discussion by suggesting that feminist scholars have traditionally challenged cultural devaluation of the female form by celebrating women’s bodies as sites of ‘pleasure’. Wendell (1996:165) suggests that in doing so, some disabled women may feel detached from this process, insofar as they cannot perceive how their experiences of bodily ‘suffering’ can be accounted for in this movement. In her argument, Wendell is not suggesting that disabled women cannot experience bodily pleasure and contentment. Rather, she demonstrates how feminist explorations of the body have traditionally and problematically assumed the body without impairments as a template.

Further addressing cultural attitudes toward women, Bordo (1990:336) acknowledges that women face pressures from the media, and in culture more broadly, to enact ‘self-monitoring and self-normalisation’. Bordo highlights how, in the media, women are often evaluated on the basis of their physical appearance (Fannon, 2016). Although Bordo does not explicitly refer to disabled women’s bodies, her critical work on the media and culture articulates how the female body is often construed as an ‘object of consumption’, rather than belonging to a unique individual (Fannon, 2016). Feminist disability studies recognises disabled women’s embodied knowledge as an important tool in resisting these types of cultural oppression faced by disabled women.

However, among feminist disability studies scholars, there are divergent understandings of personal experience. Some scholars, such as Fawcett (2000), Morris (1991) and Wendell (1996), exercise caution toward undiluted faith in personal experience as resembling the absolute ‘truth’. Fawcett (2000) suggests that personal accounts of disability and gender oppression are important. However, she argues that abstract analyses are also needed, considering matters beyond what can be experienced first-hand. Furthermore, Morris (1991) adds that personal experience is always shaped by socio-cultural contexts. In her view, it is misleading to suggest that the recounting of personal experience is not impacted by socio- cultural ideologies. Thomas (1999:75) mediates this debate by describing disabled women’s personal narratives as a ‘window on the social’. Building on Thomas’ approach, the feminist disability studies approach taken in this article understands disabled women’s experiences as a means of understanding how advertising representations impact on those who they are meant to portray. Individual narratives are not understood as providing ‘pure’ insights into disabled women’s psyches. Instead, they are explored as a means of enhancing knowledge of how disabled women navigate advertising portrayals and cultural stereotypes.

# Critically examining disability and gender representation in advertising

Gill (2007) reports that feminist values are frequently interpreted in a superficial and contradictory manner in the media. To explain, slogans associated with feminism in popular culture, such as “girl power”, are increasingly endorsed (Gill, 2007:1). Additionally, portrayals of bold and assertive women are increasingly replacing traditional advertising representations of women as weaker than male counterparts (Kohrs and Gill, 2018). However, despite the rising emergence of pro-empowerment campaigns directed toward women, sexist narratives - such as fixation on women’s physical appearance - continue to dominate the media (Gill, 2007).

Feminist scholars have attributed advertising as a key medium in which female empowerment has been misconstrued. For example, there is the portrayal of feminism in a way that is commercially appealing, leading to superficial understandings of female empowerment in ads (Duffy, 2010; Gill, 2008). Gill (2008) suggests that women are increasingly shown as sexually empowered in ads. Despite this seemingly positive move forward, Gill suggests that representations of women’s sexual practices and desires are commonly presented in ways that dominantly attract and conform to male pleasure. Her findings here, lead to the question of whether and how links between disability and risk in advertising cater to non-disabled people’s curiosity about disabled people.

Contributing to the debate, Davis (2013) suggests that the makers of ads frequently approach human diversity in superficial ways. To illustrate his point, Davis focuses on a joint advertising campaign between *Wallmart* and *Dove,* ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’. In his view, the ad approaches diversity in a tokenistic manner. Davis (2013:4) argues that the makers of the ad take a ‘cherry-picking’ approach to diversity. He suggests that they fail to include a broad range of diverse bodies, for example, women with impairments or those who present with mental health issues. Similarly to Davis’ critique of superficial portrayals of diversity in advertising, Heiss (2011) draws attention to the dearth of research on the representation of disabled women in advertisements. Focusing on *Dove’s* (2004) advertising ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’, Heiss suggests that the representations of gender and disability do not successfully promote inclusion, rather, they portray ‘an ideology of naïve integration which (re)inscribed meaning on the normate body and (re)made the body through beauty practices’. Here, Heiss articulates the burgeoning integration of disability and gender imagery in ads as resting on, rather than challenging, notions of ‘normal’ body aesthetics.

Alike to Davis (2013) and Heiss (2011), Bolt (2014) raises concerns relating to the representation of disabled women in ads. His ‘ableist advertising aesthetic’ provides a framework for measuring the extent to which ads progressively or regressively represent disabled women (Bolt, 2014:28). Five categories (distortion, alterity, disclosure, segregation and exclusion) are outlined as recurring factors in advertising representations of disability. Bolt finds that the makers of ads continually portray disabled people as the willing recipients of pity (distortion) and fail to adequately reflect realistic narratives of disabled people’s everyday lives (alterity). In later work, Bolt (2019:105) argues that ‘normative positivisms’ – socially reinforced expectations surrounding how people should think, act and appear – continue to be upheld in recent advertising campaigns aiming to present empowering messages regarding disabled women.

Meanwhile, Haller and Ralph (2006) have found that the makers of ads are taking riskier approaches when portraying disabled people and suggest that this can help to challenge disabling assumptions and stereotypes in society. While Haller and Ralph make a salient point that bold and risky advertising portrayals of disabled people can capture audience attention and challenge the assumption that impairment automatically equals deficit, the question of ‘whose risk?’ begs to be asked. Are the makers of ads inclined to use risky representations of disability in order to create an edgy branding image? If so, might the realistic and everyday lives of disabled people become, to use Shakespeare’s (1994) phrase, ‘dustbins for disavowal’ in the process? As US disability studies scholars Mitchell and Snyder (2000) illustrate with their concept of ‘narrative prosthesis’, the problem is that disabled women may be used in an opportunistic manner, in order to bolster the aims of an ‘unconventional’ advertising campaign.

Garland Thomson’s (2002) taxonomy of ‘visual rhetorics’ – an analytical approach to the representation of disabled people in visual media - is relevant when considering the question of ‘whose risk?’ and examining how the theme of risk may impact on socio-cultural narratives surrounding women with impairments. Through her framework of visual rhetorics, Garland Thomson suggests that critical analyses of disability imagery offer more than evaluative (‘positive’ or ‘negative’) judgements, in terms of considering how visual media can persuade audiences to think in a certain way about disabled people. There are four visual rhetorics: the wondrous, sentimental, exotic and realistic. Whereas ‘wondrous’ images of disability may persuade audiences that disabled people inspire awe, sentimental portrayals of disability can encourage audiences to feel sympathetic and protective towards disabled people. Realistic images arguably provide more empowering representations of disability as they seek to minimise the gap between supposedly non-disabled and disabled people. The ‘exotic’ category is most relevant to this article’s focus on advertising portrayals of disabled women as risky. In contrast to the minimisation of difference that realistic images strive for, representations of disabled people as exotic seek to portray people with impairments as ‘sensationalised’ and ‘entertaining in their difference’ (Garland Thomson, 2002:65).

Arguably, the presentation of disabled women as risky bears connotations of fear and implies difference to commonly accepted behaviours and appearances – factors that are aligned with the notion of exoticness.

Heeding Garland Thomson’s emphasis on creating analyses, rather than judgements, of visual media, it is important to explore how representations of disabled people as risky and exotic may be both useful and harmful. Considering that disabled people have been historically represented as passive and pitiable recipients of charity in the media (Bolt, 2014), exotic disability imagery may be a powerful means by which patronising cultural attitudes can be contested. However, tying exotic narratives to disability may also result in the objectification and of people with impairments as anomalies and legitimises the treatment of disabled people as spectacles. While caution should be exercised when exploring the link between disabled people and ‘riskiness’ in ads, it is also necessary to recognise the wider and more varied integration of disability into the world of advertising as ultimately useful. Until the late twentieth century, disabled people mainly appeared in charity ads, with the main purpose of creating pitying responses from viewers, to raise charitable funds (Bolt, 2014). Previous research has uncovered reliance on stereotypical notions of women with mental health issues as ‘unstable’ and ‘inherently lacking’ in early-twentieth-century ads (Houston, 2016:1). Furthermore, in 2001, Ganahl and Arbuckle found that people with mobility/physical impairments are more likely to be portrayed as less powerful in TV ads. It is noteworthy that in my research, conducted little over a decade and a half later, the theme of ‘risk’ is identified in advertising representations of women with mobility impairments. Therefore, it could be argued that disabled people are now less likely to be portrayed as passive in advertising – a move that indicates cultural attitudes are becoming less fixed in stereotypical assumptions.

# The study

A qualitative methodological approach is taken in the research, influenced by the feminist disability studies appreciation of disabled women’s voices as a way in which societal structures, attitudes and practices can be illustrated and challenged (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). The positivist aim of researcher ‘objectivity’ is rejected, in favour of a feminist methodological lens that seeks to recognise my interpretation of ads as a subjective, yet critically-informed process. My interpretation of participant data is understood as a process that is fragmentary in nature, yet seeks to contribute to a creation of knowledge that helps to empower, rather than disassociate from, disabled women (Sprague, 2018). Direct and lengthy participant narratives are included in the data analysis section, in order to mitigate the extent to which I, as the researcher, control data interpretation processes (Sprague, 2018).

The research design is comprised of two core phases. Phase one is comprised of my application of textual (TA), critical (CDA) and multi modal (MMDA) discourse analyses to a sample of three ads. Phase two focuses on narrative analysis of participant responses to the same ads. In the first phase, textual analysis is used to map core themes from each ad. Then, critical and multi-modal discourse analyses are applied in order to deepen inquiry and specifically focus on how certain words and terms connote ideas relating to disability and gender (CDA) and the ways in which colours, font style and images (MMDA) contribute to emerging themes in each ad.

Below are brief contexts for each ad:

*Channel Four’s* (2014) ‘Prototype’ television ad, UK:

*Channel Four’s* ad, featuring Viktoria Modesta – described on *Channel Four’s* website as the ‘world’s first amputee pop-artist’ - was aired on UK (evening) television in 2014, as part of the channel’s ‘Born Risky’ campaign. Frequently, the full ad would not be aired as it is just over six minutes in length, instead, small segments of the ad would be shown.

*Nordstrom’s* (2014) print ad, US:

*Nordstrom* is an American fashion retailer. The model featured in the ad is Jillian Mercado, a fashion blogger and writer based in America. Mercado has also modelled for fashion label *Diesel* and has muscular dystrophy. On her personal website, as of 2 January 2018, Mercado describes herself as a ‘model, creative, activist, Latina’.

*Kenneth Cole’s* (2009) print ad, US:

*Kenneth Cole*, founded in the early 1980s, is a fashion company based in the US. This ad was produced as part of their campaign, ‘We All Walk in Different Shoes’. Some of the other ads in the campaign featured a woman with a HIV+ tattoo and a man using a wheelchair. Aimee Mullins is featured in this ad. She is most famous for her career as a Paralympic athlete, actor and model. Additionally, Mullins uses prosthetic legs.

TA was applied to each individual ad to establish interpretations of the dominant messages surrounding disability, gender and the main purposes of individual ads. TA enables researchers to rigorously interpret meanings and wider socio-cultural messages from texts (Slater, 1998; McKee, 2003). TA was applied before discourse analyses, in order to enable my familiarity with the core messages in each ad and to foreground more detailed applications of critical and multimodal discourse analyses. My notes – organised in separate Word documents for each ad

- focused on identifying general themes and my first impressions of the advertising content.

Next, CDA was applied to each ad in order to deepen understanding of key messages and outline how words and terms contribute to themes surrounding disability and gender. Different colours were used to code words and terms. Data gathered was stored in tables (a separate table was used for each ad). Themes were given as column headings and evidencing data was stored correspondingly. Fairclough (2003:8) suggests that critical analysis of cultural texts is an important means by which researchers can uncover how texts act as ‘social agents’ and impact upon people’s behaviours, the physical world and relations between people. Furthermore, Grue (2009; 2011; 2015) highlights how the social justice leaning of CDA fits well with disability studies aims.

MMDA was then applied to each ad in order to analyse the ways in which text layout, style, font and colour schemes contributed to key themes. MMDA was used as a means of further evidencing how themes surrounding disability and gender are given maximum impact through written, oral and visual communication. This method facilitates analysis of different aspects of a text in tandem, for example, approaching how the font size, style and colour may interact with written text to affect meaning. In texts, images and colours act as a bolster to the language that is used. For example, the colour of a text has an effect on the reader’s overall impression (Barthes, 1964; 1977). Working with a printed copy of each ad, images that appeared to carry significant meaning within the ad were circled. Notes were also made directly next to creative aspects of ads, highlighting font styles, colours and metaphors that could be associated with aspects of the text, for example, the colour red may indicate passion, or, a shadow in the background could indicate depth of character. The television ad was viewed three times, and each time, notes regarding the multi-modal features of the ad were made.

In phase two, data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a useful tool in feminist research, due to their potential for involving participants in the research process and ability to facilitate participant steering of conversations (Westmarland, 2001). Using six open-ended questions, individual and one-off interviews (each lasting around an hour) with a purposively selected sample of five women who self-identify as having mobility impairment were carried out. Participants were recruited via women’s studies, disability and media studies mailing lists. My recruitment email stated my position as a feminist disability studies researcher and invited expressions of interest from women who identify as disabled. All participants were over the age of eighteen and lived in the UK at the time of interview.

As a result of the recruitment strategy, the participant sample is comprised of privileged disabled women (all participants were university-educated). A considerable limitation of the research relates to the narrow participant sample. It is recognised that only including the voices of disabled women who are university educated is a considerable limitation of the research design. Moreover, some participants had previously engaged with disability studies

– either in their education or through personal interest. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that this factor is likely to have influenced their critical responses to advertising representations of disabled women and the likelihood of participants drawing on disability studies concepts and issues. Developing this research in the future, a key area for development will entail working with a more diverse participant sample. In doing so, broader recruitment strategies will be employed, for example, disseminating calls for participants via disability and women’s organisations and social/support groups. A further limitation of the research is found in the sample of ads, as they only represent women with mobility impairment, mental health issues and visual impairment. The decision was made to only focus on these impairment categories as they were the most recurrent portrayals among the ads uncovered in my search. Future developments to this research will entail focusing on a more diverse range of advertising representations of disabled women, in order to gain a more in-depth and intersectional understanding.

While it is recognised that the participant sample is not reflective of a wide spectrum of disabled women, from a feminist disability studies perspective it is important to consider that participation in research can be a means of consciousness raising on an individual level.

Research seeking to uphold social justice values can do so, in part, by emphasising the role of research participation in enhancing individual awareness and engagement with socio-cultural issues (Kitchin, 1999). Therefore, while the research process did not involve a broad range of disabled women, it retained the ability to raise consciousness for the small sample of disabled women involved. By critically considering limitations of the research design, the production of ‘knowledge’ is understood as fragmentary by nature and it is accepted that the knowledge uncovered is incomplete and may conflict with the lived experiences of other disabled women.

During interviews, participants were shown ads and were asked six open-ended questions, relating to three main areas: personal responses toward advertising representations of disability and gender, defining life experiences as disabled women, and the extent to which advertising representations affect subjective wellbeing and sense of ‘self’. The interview data was analysed through application of narrative analysis. First, each interview was read, in order to develop my familiarity with key narrative aspects. Next, to track emerging themes in participant narratives, various narrative threads were colour-coordinated. For example, if a participant discussed their family, parts of the transcript that referred to family would be highlighted in the colour yellow. The experiences of disabled women were understood as ‘stories’ and an important focus was placed on understanding how participants selected certain events from their lives, personal experiences and described their identities (Riessman, 2003). Considering the narratives of disabled women as self-structured stories fits well with Ribbens and Edwards’ (1998:13) call for feminist qualitative researchers to gather ‘forms of self-representation, and to make visible a different, alternative, social and cultural order within which to define our identity and subjectivity’.

The cohesion of methods in both phases is important in providing a critical examination of not only advertising representations of disabled women, but also figuring how these representations impact on the individuals who they are supposed to portray. Data gathered from both phases are brought together for the discussion of findings, with a focus on how both data sets compare, contrast and extend one another.

# Disabled women as ‘risky’ in advertising: A recipe to create ‘fear’, subvert normative ideologies, or, simply a form of ‘safe quirkiness’?

In my analyses of *Channel Four* and *Nordstrom’s* ads, key themes relating to risk, danger and fear were established and perceived as largely problematic. The disabled woman featured, Viktoria Modesta, is presented as a spectacle-type figure throughout the ad and as a manifestation of fear and danger, as opposed to a woman with a multi-faceted identity.

Garland Thomson’s (2002) visual rhetoric of the ‘exotic’ is invoked: Modesta’s impairment is used to invite audience fascination. Moreover, the main tagline is ‘Born Risky’ and the message, ‘some of us were born to take risks’ is also shown on the screen. The overt way in which risk is attached to a disabled woman in the ad is indicative of Garland Thomson’s (1997, 2002) concept of cultural othering and exotic portrayals of disability. Rather than portraying riskiness as one element of Modesta’s life, riskiness is highlighted as Modesta’s most defining trait and sets her aside from other people, so much so that she is viewed as a threat to society (shown explicitly in the scenes where she is questioned by guards).

Bolt’s (2014) ‘ableist advertising aesthetic’ is useful here, in particular the categories of ‘distortion’ and ‘alterity’. The theme of risk is so pervasive and central to the ad’s narrative that Modesta’s identity as a disabled woman with various personality traits is subsumed under her role as a risky character. It is possible that those involved in the production of the ad may wish to present what Haller and Ralph (2006) describe as a ‘bold’ and provocative representation of a disabled woman. However, a key concern from a feminist disability studies perspective is that a general audience may view this ad and one of their key ‘take- away’ messages is likely to equate disability as inextricably linked with risk. Considering that impairment is a part of everyday life for most people, this message can be interpreted as unrealistic and irresponsible.

Applying MMDA to *Channel Four’s* ad facilitates deeper insight into the ways in which the theme of ‘risk’ is implied through multi-modalities. The first couple of scenes immediately introduce the theme of risk: the first scene is entirely black and the only noise that can be heard is that of a steel, spiked prosthetic leg hitting the floor. An atmosphere of suspense is created through audio cues. White text is shown against the black background: ‘forget what you know about disability / *Channel Four* presents / a new kind of pop artist’. The first glimpse of Modesta only features her legs and her black, spiked prosthetic leg is the focus of the frame. The next scene features Modesta sitting high up on a throne while people in red, hooded cloaks are kneeling close to her. One person is holding a knife (with blood on the tip) and another is holding a large needle. Her prosthetic legs are not visible during this scene. Through applying MMDA to these scenes, visual cues signalling risk and danger are given. The ad’s main purpose at this point appears to be building audience suspense for the ‘reveal’ of the main event – Modesta’s disability status.

Next, Modesta is portrayed as a cartoon character on a small television. A young girl watches Modesta’s cartoon and tries to take a leg from her doll, in order for her doll to emulate Modesta. The girl’s mother enters the room and is visibly distressed at this sight. Again, the notion of Modesta as a threat to society is reinforced. Scenes then flash on the screen of Modesta’s legs – she is walking on a wooden floor and her prosthetic leg is shining brightly and is surrounded by moths. The unusual prosthetic legs Modesta wears serve as a device to immediately attract the audience’s attention. Her prosthetic legs are an artful and powerful expression of individual style. However, her elaborate prostheses are also reminiscent of Mitchell and Snyder’s (2015:12) concept of ‘hyper-prostheticisation’. To explain, rather than portraying impairment as part of every-day life, it is made into a spectacle.

One participant, Helen (pseudonyms used for all participants), who is currently studying at postgraduate level, has directly engaged with disability studies and is in her twenties, also showed scepticism regarding the portrayal of risk and fear in the ad. From her perspective, Modesta’s impairment is hyper-inflated in the ad and presented as a ‘threat’:

I feel like she’s [Modesta] trying to underline the fact that society feels threatened by what they perceive to be abnormality and that her challenging this notion of the ‘normal body’ [participant emphasis] through her very visible prosthetic and very artistically emphasised prosthetic is something that people feel threatened by and are scared of, which we can especially see when the mother tries to take her child away from the TV and she [Modesta] is later being interrogated for basically posing this political threat to, I guess, the dictatorship of normalcy… so in that sense, it is an empowering narrative but, at the same time, in order to do that she still very much subscribes to normative notions of aesthetics… wearing high-heeled shoes and otherwise meeting conventional beauty standards – being thin, white, wearing lots of make-up and expensive clothing… I don’t feel like it’s a very radical challenge of normative beauty standards… by saying ‘see this is how threatened society is by my difference’, you’re acknowledging that very difference. And I’m not saying brushing over it or glossing over it would, in any way be more liberatory, but, the fact that she feels that society can perceive her difference so much as a threat, in itself, carries a negative message of ‘people will never get used to this’.

Contrastingly, another participant, Joanna, who is in her fifties, has studied at postgraduate level and has previously engaged with disability studies theory and research, interpreted the final scenes where Modesta dances whilst using a spiked prosthetic leg in a more positive manner: ‘…I loved the dance bit, involving the artificial leg with a spike on the glass… I mean, how many ballerinas can smash a glass floor?’ In a similar way to Joanna, Mary-Jane, who is studying at postgraduate level and is in her fifties, suggested that ‘outrageous’ representations are more likely to challenge societal preconceptions of disabled women.

Another participant, Louise, comparatively highlighted the scene where Modesta stamps on the ground using her spiked prosthesis as powerful. Louise is in her twenties, and is currently setting up her own disability foundation. She also has experience of disability studies. For Louise, the scene reminded her of moments when she is frustrated by oppressive attitudes and opinions:

… there’s one particular bit where she stabs her prosthetic spike down a few times… it kind of made me think it’s a form of saying ‘this is for all of the times when I’ve been a bit cheesed off – I’m showing you that it’s not stopping me from doing what I want to do’. But at the same time, part of it shows the little girl watching [a scene in the advertisement depicts a young girl observing Modesta on the television] and how everyone was horrified because of how different she [Modesta] was. When that advertisement first came out… a lot of people were negative about it because they said that she has different forms of prosthetic limbs but they thought the spiked one was a little bit too ‘out there’, as in it showed the difference a little bit too much and it was kind of highlighting the problem… She [Modesta] came back and was like, ‘well for me the spike shows that I have a difference and I am proud it’ and I thought, actually, she’s got a good point… I think it’s quite good that she wants to be so ‘out there’.

The contrasting interpretations held by participants signifies the way in which individuals strongly draw upon their own subjectivities and personal values when negotiating ads and exploring cultural attitudes. Louise immediately connected the advertising representation to her frustration with disabling attitudes and suggested that the ad sparks important public conversations surrounding disability.

Mary-Jane similarly suggested that the ad’s ‘risky’ approach to disability is helpful in subverting stereotypes of passivity surrounding disabled women. Here, Mary-Jane reflects Haller and Ralph’s (2006) view that provocative portrayals of disability are most useful in transforming societal attitudes:

I like the idea of being ‘born risky’… I love the strength that women are bringing out and being able to say things - big statements that build people up… disabled women especially... I think it’s really important that she’s challenging… a lot of the ways that we’ve been brought up – well, to be safe. To be more than safe, to be so safe that it’s ridiculous. Instead of being able to take appropriate risks, to make mistakes and learn from them…

As discussed, not all participants agreed that *Channel Four’s* ad provides a useful link between disability, gender and riskiness. However, all of the disabled women interviewed perceived a positive link between disabled women and ‘risk’ in *Nordstrom’s* ad featuring Jillian Mercado. Through application of MMDA, the theme of ‘risk/rebellion’ is identified through visual signs: Mercado has dyed purple hair, wears rock-style clothes and gazes self- assuredly into the camera lens. The risky/rebellious tone of the ad works well insofar as Mercado is presented as a woman with a clear sense of confidence within her own style and personality. Mitchell and Snyder’s (2015:14) concept of ‘antinormative’ disability representations is apt here – Mercado is presented as comfortable with her own body, rather than depending on deficit-based approaches to the disabled body.

Mercado is positioned in the right centre half of the frame and her figure takes up just over half of the frame. The background is comprised of dark white/grey shades, and it is bare, meaning that audience attention is focused on Mercado. Her whole body is facing towards the right side of the frame, apart from her head, which is turned to face the camera lens. Mercado appears to be wearing little make-up. Her hair is roughly styled, in a short pixie crop and it is coloured light purple. She appears to be slightly smiling and seems calm. She is wearing black clothes: a leather jacket, patterned skirt that falls below her knees and leather boots with a chunky, small heel. Her style is evocative of punk/rock. Mercado’s power-wheelchair

takes up almost half of the whole frame. The accessories she wears, such as the chunky boots and black leather jacket are similar in appearance to her black and robust looking wheelchair. It is possible that the accessories Mercado wears are intended to appear as an extension from her wheelchair. Such a technique could be progressive – instead of portraying Mercado’s wheelchair as a foreign, undesirable object, the makers of the ad are positioning the wheelchair as part of the overall style aesthetic.

Mercado and her wheelchair are presented in a direct and unfiltered way. Both are not designed to appear as ‘spectacle’, rather, the image shown looks like a snapshot from everyday life. The makers of the ad have not explicitly made a link between disabled women and ‘risk’. Rather, they have presented an image of a disabled woman who happens to have an edgy/risky fashion style. Although Mercado is conventionally attractive, her punk/rock style connotes an attitude of resisting traditional beauty conventions and her robust-looking wheelchair provides a clear visual ‘sign’ that she is disabled. Therefore, the makers of the ad avoid falling into the category of ‘naïve integration’ – a term used by Heiss (2011) to describe the superficial way in which bodily diversity is often approached in advertising.

Helen and Mary-Jane both enthused that Mercado has a rock-star vibe, while Louise commented that Mercado looks ‘happy’ and Penelope described her as ‘trendy’. A key positive aspect is that the ad does not approach diversity in a tokenistic manner, as described by Helen:

…she’s shown on her own… something you often have with these supposedly inclusive advertisements, they’ll portray a bunch of normal people and the odd wheelchair user [laughing]… She looks a bit like a punk, rock star fan. That’s quite nice because leather jackets and purple-bluish dyed hair is usually associated with a subversive, rebellious subculture and wheelchair users are not usually

perceived as rebellious… it’s nice that that’s part of her identity and she might just be going to a rock-concert, just like anyone else would.

Helen’s appreciation of the ad illustrates Davis’ (2013) critical exploration of the ‘diverse’ body in advertising. A key point made by Davis is that so-called inclusion of diversity in neoliberal contexts often casts the diverse body as undistinguishable from its ‘normal’ counterparts. In doing so, the beauty and value of diversity on its own terms is subsumed. Helen suggests that Mercado is not presented as a tokenistic ‘diverse body’ in the ad. The portrayal of a disabled women as risky works well in this ad because ‘normative’ ways of appearing are not reinforced (Bolt, 2019). Rather, Mercado appears to be proud of her identity as a disabled woman.

In contrast to *Nordstrom’s* depiction of Mercado in an unfiltered manner, *Kenneth Cole’s* ad, featuring Aimee Mullins, relies heavily on normative beauty standards – a popular trend reinforced in supposedly ‘empowering’ advertising campaigns (Bolt, 2019). Mullins is conventionally attractive and the only visible ‘sign’ that she has bodily impairment are a pair of largely unnoticeable prosthetic legs. The top of one of her skin-coloured prosthetic legs is partially obscured by her skirt. Arguably, the makers of the ad are intending to make the audience ‘double-take’ as it is not immediately obvious that Mullins has bodily impairment. Whilst it is true that many people who use prosthetic limbs may wear clothing that, intentionally or unintentionally, disguises their prostheses, it is notable that the makers of the ad choose to gradually disclose Mullins’ only visible impairment, while promoting the theme of non- conformity and risk through the tagline: ‘non-uniform thinking’. Bolt (2014) suggests that disability status is often quietly disclosed in ads to ensure that normative aesthetics are not drastically challenged.

Interestingly, when discussing how disability is commonly ‘tolerated’ in neoliberal contexts, Mitchell and Snyder (2015:44) use Aimee Mullins as an example of the ‘able-disabled’. In using this term, Mitchell and Snyder describe how only select disabled people – those who largely fall within normative aesthetic standards – are integrated into ‘mainstream’ society and culture. Mullins wears a black knee-length skirt, black stilettos and a bright red tank top underneath a tightly fitted black jacket. Her hair is neatly tied back and she appears to be wearing make-up, including black eye shadow and red lipstick. One of her legs is slightly turned inwards and she has a hands-on-hips pose. She is positioned at the centre-left of the frame and holds a dominant pose as her body takes up most of the frame’s space. Her head is titled slightly upwards and her eyes look down towards the camera lens, giving the impression that she is superior to the audience.

The ad’s tagline ‘We All Walk In Different Shoes’ is placed in the mid-section of the frame and is closely positioned to the right side of Mullins’ torso. The tagline uses black capital letters and the font gives the impression of being handwritten, presumably by Mullins.

Smaller text below reads, ‘Aimee Mullins, Paralympic athlete, actor, and president of the women’s sports foundation’. At the bottom right of the frame there is another section of small text, ‘kennethcole.com/25 years of non-uniform thinking’. The handwritten and informal style of font gives a relaxed and non-conformist impression. One participant, Penelope, who has an undergraduate degree and is in her thirties, critically approached the ad’s claim of ‘non-uniform thinking’ and suggests that the theme of risk is ostentatious:

…the idea of non-conformity is all very well but when it’s used in advertising… it’s conforming the non-conformist. Advertising itself conforms things, so how non- conformist the advertisement is – it is commodifying it… that’s what advertising does because it’s trying to sell something, it’s trying to sell a commodity… the body is a commodity, that’s the whole point of advertising. So when the advertisement’s saying

‘we all walk in different shoes’, ‘we think outside the box/non uniform thinking’, it’s commodifying that non-uniformity, in a way. It’s saying ‘I think outside the box and we can sell that and we can sell disabled people’s bodies, look at what we can sell’, and that’s the problem. That’s why it’s not positive… she’s [Mullins] a very particular and pretty woman… it’s very particular aesthetics, so everything is kind of normal within that context… but then she’s got this quirkiness about her which can then be commodified and they can say ‘we all walk in different shoes’ and that’s to sell the shoes. So, it’s a safe quirkiness again....

Joanna’s analysis of the same ad carried a similarly critical tone and she highlighted how normative standards are reinforced through the presence of two models who largely pertain to conventional beauty standards that are not inclusive for a wide variety of women:

…they’re still quite normate bodies [referring to both Modesta and Mullins]… Here we have a woman [Mullins] who looks like Marilyn Monroe, who is standing there quite provocatively and that isn’t how I look. So again, I wouldn’t see myself as reflected in this particular advert… I guess for me this image reminds me that I haven’t worn a skirt since I was thirteen and I can’t wear a skirt because of my mobility impairment… So, therefore, I can’t do this whole feminine thing.

Penelope and Joanna’s analyses comparably demonstrate how tokenistic representations of disabled women can be harmful to individual self-esteem. Rather than perceiving realistic portrayals of bodily diversity that enables them to draw links with their own lives, both women refer to an unerring reliance on normative aesthetics in both ads. In the cases of the ads produced by *Kenneth Cole* and *Channel Four,* mobility impairment is used as a metaphor for ‘risk’. As discussed at an earlier point in this article, the problem of disabled women being used as a ‘prop’ to bolster an advertising narrative is enacted (Mitchell and Snyder,

2000). In *Kenneth Cole’s* ad, impairment is largely unapparent. However, its slight presence serves to disrupt the otherwise normative aesthetics supported in the ad. In *Channel Four’s* ad, impairment is presented in a much bolder manner and frequently manifests as the biggest attraction. Despite the different approaches taken in both ads, they both appropriate mobility impairment as a marker of risk. As opposed to suggesting that among other things, disabled women can be rebellious and risky - as is shown in *Nordstrom’s* ad.

# Conclusion

This article uniquely shows how individuals draw upon their life experiences and personal values when navigating advertising representations and cultural stereotypes surrounding disabled women. The research findings suggest that women with mobility impairment do not passively internalise disability and gender stereotypes. Instead individuals undergo a process of evaluation – evoking their personal beliefs and life-experiences, when engaging with ads. The findings do not provide a straightforward response to the question of whether and how the representation of women with mobility impairments as risky in advertising is useful or problematic. In fact, by not providing a clear consensus as to whether the theme of riskiness is progressive when linked to disabled women, the findings support the understanding of cultural representation of marginalised identity groups as a multifaceted process that necessitates a reflexive approach.

A potential limitation of this research is that a small sample of ads and participants are used, therefore, generalizable statements regarding the advertising representation of disabled women cannot be elicited. However, through focusing on the narratives of disabled women and their qualitative responses to ads, the process of inclusively portraying disabled women in ads as inherently complex is demonstrated. As such, it is not suggested that there is straightforward path that the makers of ads can follow in order to produce inclusive

advertising representations of disabled women. Moreover, the purpose of this research is not to suggest, in a conclusive manner, that ads should or should not aim to emulate ‘risky’ portrayals of disabled women, in order to effectively challenge societal prejudices.

Rather, the findings presented in this article can be used on an international level, by makers of ads and researchers, to help address the problem of disabled women’s misrepresentation in culture and to deepen critical understanding of disability and gender representation in modern advertising. It would be fruitful for those involved in the production of ads to use the findings presented in this article to recognise the importance of actively listening to the voices of individuals portrayed in ads. In doing so, the makers of ads would be more able to reflect scenarios that accurately portray real-life situations, thus building stronger links with potential consumers and striving towards advertising imagery that carries responsible and realistic messages.

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